

## Convergent Sport Culture: Mediating the Game

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There is a sense in sports that there is no replacement for watching a game live. In a recent ad campaign Major League Baseball told its fans: “Your Grandfather never misses a chance to tell you he saw Joe Dimaggio play the field. Or maybe it's your dad, telling you he saw Hank Aaron go deep. Now's your chance, to tell your kids that you saw Albert Pujols, do everything. This is beyond living history. This is beyond baseball.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykMbwDatxdM> or [http://mlb.mlb.com/beyond\\_baseball/index.jsp](http://mlb.mlb.com/beyond_baseball/index.jsp)) Deeply ingrained in the sports fan mentality is the idea that watching a pitcher strike out the side on television, listening to a home run on the radio or reading about a championship game in the newspaper is just not the same as watching it live, as being there. Despite the fact that professional sports are broadcast on television, over the radio and online as well as being covered by newspapers, blogs and highlight sows, people still want to go to games. Despite how the experience of sports has changed in a media-saturated, convergent culture, the live game and the real player are still privileged.

On the one hand, the importance of the live is a valuable commentary on the ongoing importance of the real, even in a postmodern media landscape. However, beginning with this aura of real-ness is a dangerous proposition because despite the fact that we can go the park and see Albert Pujols, sit 15 yards from where Tim Lincecum throws his warm-up tosses, catch a foul ball or even a home run off Ryan Howard's bat, these are not real people that we experience, but constructed personae. Part of that construction lies in the mystique contained in the unique ability to see our favorite team, our favorite sport and our favorite players live, but we cannot pretend that that (semi-)direct experience is wholly formative of our experience of these stars. Though I think we should begin with the difference inherent in sports and sports stars versus film and television and their stars, it is useful to draw on star studies as an established theoretical foundation that points us towards how to understand the ideological functions of athletes, teams and sports.

My theoretical/methodological interest in star studies is, basically, two-fold. First, I want to draw on the idea that stars “act out aspects of life that matter to us” (Dyer *Heavenly Bodies*, 17). Second I would draw on the understanding of film stars as texts comprised of both roles on screen and extratextual discourse surrounding the star off-screen.

Starting with the latter point the question I want to ask is: What is the primary text of the athlete, of the sports star? On the one hand the text is literally the athlete's performance on the field. However that pure physical performance is seldom seen or heard on its own. Much of what we see and hear and know about a player is through media outlets. When we see a performance on television it is mediated by *SportsCenter's* editing or the broadcaster's commentary or news media editorials. Thus as much as a player is constructed through athletic performance, we nonetheless understand that performance discursively and contextually.

Take for example, the Albert Pujols ad cited above. Though MLB tells us to go see him do everything, as if his performance were all that mattered, Pujols-- a Latino player-- is situated alongside Hank Aaron and Joe Dimaggio both of whom were touchstone players not only statistically but also socially and politically. These players are made to transcend the social and political aspects of the game through their athletic prowess. Yet of course, by situating them as such they nonetheless act out issues that matter to us, issues of social and political importance, issues of race and history, Latinos in America and of the American dream. They transcend race, because we want to transcend race. Sport provides that transcendence because of the quantifiable physical performance which it constitutes. Sport seems to prove equality, to make social justice visible. Yet this emphasis on the physical also silences the athletes themselves, confirms that they are active bodies but passive as social agents. And this is made far worse by the reality that people of color are disproportionately visible in sports than in any other field in contemporary American life. They are constructed as bodies without voices.

All of this has been naturalized in no small part through the mechanisms of conventional sports journalism primarily television highlights on ESPN and the local news and beat reporting from official outlets in print and online. The question I ultimately want to pose is the following: is this the only discourse available through which to read the text of sport or the sports star? It is certainly the dominant one. Unlike developments in niche television, sports-- particularly on television-- are still one of the few reliable *mass* media. But what about new media? What about the dozens and dozens of blogs which cover a given team? What kind of extratextual discourse, what kind of alternative readings might be provided there? Does it differ from team to team, player to player or sport to sport? Further, to return to my original point, might there be a way in which the ability to see a player live undermines any and all of these discourses? By focusing a lens through stardom, I think we can better ask questions about the continuities and discontinuities in not only how we follow sports today and how we have followed sports historically but what we learn through that activity.